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ABSTRACT

The Oregon Small Schools Program began in 1963 as a means of serving the needs of Oregon's 215 school districts with 1,000 or fewer students. Coordinated by the state department of education, the program provides assistance to small schools in identifying and delivering services available from other state agencies and from the communities. The Small Schools Association helps member schools define and meet their goals, improve communication between state and local levels, and coordinate programs and activities to share resources and information among members of the association. The program functions in liaison with principals' and superintendents' organizations, with the state school boards association, and with colleges and universities. (DS)

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HOW TO EXPAND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL DISTRICTS

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HOW TO EXPAND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL DISTRICTS

National School Boards Association
April 10, 1976

It is my pleasure to share with you how Oregon has expanded the learning opportunities in small school districts.

The Oregon small schools story began in 1963 when a study by the Department of Education showed that 24% of Oregon's high schools had an average daily attendance of 100 or fewer.

A Small Schools Advisory Committee was appointed by the Department of Education, and they decided the best approach would be to provide positive help for the small schools, rather than trying to identify the "necessary" schools. Their goal was to help small schools become good schools.

A Title III, ESEA project was written and funded in 1966, "The Small High School Improvement Project." It was voluntary, and participation was open to high schools of 200 and fewer.

In 1970, a second, expanded project was funded for high schools of 350 or fewer and the elementary schools which fed into them. During both of these projects, inservice and dissemination were the means of providing alternatives and new techniques in the effort to improve instruction.

Notable educational leaders from all over the nation were brought in to work with teachers and administrators from the small schools in:

- behavioral objectives
- learning packages
- questioning strategies
- interaction analysis
- staffing patterns
- scheduling
- individualized instruction
- curriculum improvement

- career education
- small group process
- use of media
- improving the self concept

These and other topics were presented at various kinds of conferences:

- One-day regional conferences;
- Training sessions for administrators and group leaders;
- Statewide curriculum meetings planned specifically for small schools;
- Special small schools sessions at statewide professional conferences, such as Principals' and Superintendents' conferences and the Oregon School Boards Association convention; and
- Our week-long Small Schools Summer Institute.

We developed an outstanding linking system through staff visits, the above mentioned conference pattern, our periodic Small Schools Newsletter. We also encouraged teachers, administrators, and board members to get out and visit other schools to observe first-hand good programs that were going on. We were able to finance or help finance many of these visitations.

In 1973 when the Title III funds were diminishing, the Department of Education appointed a Small Schools Task Force, comprised equally of Department staff members and people from the small schools, to present a plan of action that would assist the Department in planning to meet the needs of Oregon's small schools.

The Task Force defined the "small" school as having 1,000 or fewer average daily membership for the district or high school attendance area in grades K-12, and union high school districts and elementary districts with no more than 350 students.

Two hundred fifteen districts, nearly two-thirds of Oregon's school districts, fall into this definition. This represents 1,100 school board members; 3,288 certificated people; and 50,546 students, or about 11% of the state's students.

The Task Force conducted a needs assessment, contacting these 215 districts. Based on this study, a service perception survey of the Department of Education staff, and their own experience, the Task Force recommended that:

(1) A small schools office be established in the Department, and that a full-time facilitator be assigned a position with responsibilities limited to the needs of small schools.

(2) A State Small Schools Advisory Committee be established to be advisory to the small schools office, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the State Board of Education.

(3) Money be budgeted by the Department to expand the level of services to small schools.

(4) The Small Schools Association be encouraged to continue.

All of these recommendations have been followed to at least some degree. In the two Title III projects, I had been assistant director and then director; I was hired by the Department as Small Schools Specialist. My job description is to:

- Serve as liaison to organizations serving and supporting small schools
- Provide assistance to small schools in identifying and brokering services available where needed and appropriate
- Work to sensitize the Department of Education staff at all levels about the needs of small schools and ways of delivering services to meet these needs.

(The Task Force study determined that needs of small schools may be no different from large schools, but the delivery of services differed because small schools frequently lack specialized personnel--curriculum directors, counselors, assistant superintendents, etc.)

- Focus activities on the top ten priorities identified in the needs assessment.
- Provide additional assistance to small schools in implementing State Board of Education priorities and requirements.
- Identify and transport promising practices for the small schools from throughout the state and nation.
- Provide unique services necessary for small schools, such as coordinate statewide and regional workshops.
- Participate in educational audits in the small schools.

A State Small Schools Advisory Committee was appointed. It is made up of six members, including the director of teacher training at one of the state colleges, an intermediate education district superintendent, two district superintendents, and two classroom teachers.

The Department of Education did budget a limited amount of money to hold conferences and training sessions especially for small schools. We also coordinate as many activities as possible in conjunction with other agencies to get the most value for the money spent.

And, meeting the fourth Task Force recommendation, the Oregon Small Schools Association has become a nonprofit corporation with the purpose of improving instruction in the small elementary and secondary schools in Oregon which are members of the association. Specifically:

(1) To help member schools identify and meet their goals;

(2) To improve communication among member schools, Department of Education, and other educational agencies; and

(3) To coordinate programs and activities and to provide for sharing of services, resources, and information among members of the association.

Membership is open to districts defined by the Task Force as "small" schools and to Intermediate Education Districts.

The fee schedule is on a graduated scale, ranging from $10 for a one-teacher district to $125 for a district of 26 or more certificated staff.

Membership money is used for the top priority activity, the week-long small schools summer institute. This year's institute, "Basics--and More--for Small Schools," will be held June 14-18 on the Willamette University campus in Salem. This is the eleventh annual institute.

Additional activities will be added by the association as income permits.

We are gratified by the results. In 1974, Jesse Fasold, Superintendent of Public Instruction, stated, "Of all the money that has ever been spent in this state, the greatest benefits, dollar for dollar, have come out of the Oregon Small Schools Program. It is the most innovative project we've ever had. It's one of the best in the country. People from all over the United States come here and say, 'How do you get these people turned on about such innovative tnings?' And I say, 'It's because we have the Oregon Small Schools Program.'"

We list these as the accomplishments:

(1) We've brought people together in an organized way to share

ideas, techniques, problems and solutions. Our efforts are concentrated on people.

(2) Improved the self-concept of teachers and administrators in the small schools by identifying and sharing their exemplary programs statewide.

(3) Keyed on the positive things small schools can do.

(4) Helped them seek ways to compensate for their constraints of size and/or remoteness by:

- sharing staff members, one district with another.
- using community resources, both people and facilities--community colleges, etc.
- suggesting teaching arrangements to capitalize on staff strengths and special interests.
- stressing the advantages of individualizing (personalizing) instruction--a natural for small schools.
- using commercially- and teacher-prepared instructional materials for individualizing.
- opening up the schedule to provide

  classes of 9, 12, or 18 weeks duration;
  cross-grading rather than segregating students by grade levels;
  two- and three-hour blocks of time for such things as career education;
  multi-class approach in which all courses offered in a discipline are taught every class period, for example mathematics, business.

  (A few schools have successfully tried having no formal schedule at all; rather, the staff and administrator meet weekly to prepare a "demand" schedule, based on their teaching needs.)

- sharing services with other districts as much as possible. Six of our counties are participating in a career education program using mobile vans. Another county has placed hardware in each district and circulates the software for a commercially prepared vocational program. Still another

county has a county-wide area vocational center.

It is our observation that teachers and school boards have become more responsive to the needs of kids. More community resources have been tapped, and there appears to be more community cooperation. The Intermediate Education Districts are providing more specialists and other services needed by small districts.

We have been pleased to note more administrative support for teacher attempts to change, and more teacher support for administrative ideas. Many districts provide the opportunity for their teachers to get out and visit other schools to observe other teachers teaching and to get assistance in their own planning.

Boards are more willing to provide release time and extended contract time for staff to improve their instructional programs. A very measurable indication of this was brought to our attention at our 1975 summer institute. One hundred ninety-one people attended, and of the 131 who returned institute evaluations, only 15 stated that they had to pay their entire way to the institute. The rest said that their school districts paid either all or part of the cost.

Totally, we observe the evidence of better attitudes and definite goals in mind. They have taken what they believe to be good for their districts and have expanded or tailored the ideas and techniques to fit. They have the courage to try new things.

In conclusion, the Oregon Small Schools Program has served as a major source of successful practices, innovative ideas, and inservice training for people in the project.

The success has been largely due to the efforts and enthusiasm of the teachers and administrators in the small schools. Nothing is going to happen unless there is good leadership, good teaching, and good board and community support.

Now that we are working through the Department of Education we are pooling the resources of the Department, the Small Schools Association, our Intermediate Education Districts, Principals' and Superintendents' organizations, the School Boards Association, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, colleges and universities, and other agencies to provide the needed assistance to our small schools.

Thank you.